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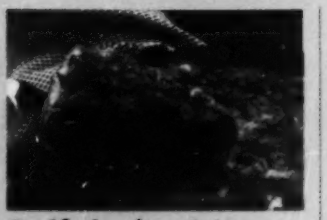

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NOVEMBER 25, 1987

A Cahners publication serving the total foodservice industry

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NOV. 25, 1987

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■ ALCOHOL SALES

Opinions Vary on Future Consumption Patterns

Operators act to temper slippage with appropriate marketing strategies.

Despite news revealing that the decline in alcohol consumption has bottomed out, the fact remains that many consumers will continue to drink less alcohol.

The National Restaurant Association reports that alcoholic beverage consumption jumped 5% from 1984 to 1986. But 1986 intake was still down 15% from 1980.

A Cahners Economics report shows consumer spending for alcohol purchased with meals and beverages was at a seasonally adjusted annual level of $24.2 billion in the first half of 1987, accounting for a real increase of 2.8% when compared to the same period of 1986. But this rise is largely the result of strong gains recently made in total eating and drinking place sales.

Many operators say they are still waiting for evidence of the NRA study to reach their neighborhoods.

"While we thought alcohol sales had bottomed out, it has not been the case," says Richard May, president of the Specialty Restaurant Division of Gilbert/Robinson, based in Kansas City, Mo. "As a matter of fact, three months ago (July) we started seeing a further decline."

Others are less pessimistic.

"We feel what the NRA is talking about isn't far from being around the corner," says Lane Cardwell, senior vice president for strategic planning at S&A Restaurant Corp., Dallas. "Most people changing their drinking behavior have already done so. Most of the legislation that has made an impact, like liability, dram shop and changing drinking ages, are already behind us.

"I expect sales will eventually begin to build," Cardwell adds. "There always tends to be a reaction to any trend. I can't pin down exactly what the motivating factor behind sales rebounding will be. But people just tend not to be static."

Regardless of all the predictions and premonitions, what has become most important to operators in terms of alcohol sales is marketing. Success now requires identifying growth areas, anticipating shifts in attitudes and timing. And operators are reacting.

Gene Sage, owner of three Chicago-area fine-dining restaurants, has historically attracted a drinking crowd. Instead of watching alcohol sales plummet, he has acted by creating new service standards, shifting the sales emphasis and, at the same time, enacting responsible service practices.

"We have shifted our emphasis on alcohol sales from across the bar to the tables," says Sage. "We also feel we have better control of how much is being consumed at the tables."

Sage has instituted alcohol sales standards for dining room and lounge servers. They have a sales quota of 1.5 drinks per customer, one bottle of wine for every five customers and one cordial for every four customers.

Along with the standards, Sage has given servers sales techniques. "Never ask a customer if they would *like* a drink," says Sage. "Ask them if they *want* a drink."

During cocktail service, servers return when the first drink is two-thirds full and offer a second drink. "At that point we don't offer a third drink," says Sage. "The customer has to buy the third drink."

Although consumers are drinking less, they are drinking better. Bar pours are becoming less important. Now it is call, call, call.

Sage is promoting business by upgrading brands without upgrading prices. He is offering a wider selection of top-shelf merchandise and prominently displays upper-level brands.

Since sales of premium products have increased, Eugenie Garrard of Flagon's Wine Bar & Bistro in New Orleans has noticed a big

HOW OFTEN ALCOHOL IS ORDERED AT RESTAURANTS

		Sex		Age			Region			
	Total	M	F	18-24	25-44	45+	NE	NW	S	W
As often (%)	59	60	57	54	59	61	74	54	55	52
Less often (%)	34	31	36	26	34	37	22	36	39	36
More often (%)	6	9	7	19	7	2	4	10	6	11

Source: National Restaurant Association Beverage Preference study

Diners still enjoy cocktails, but today they practice moderation.

jump in martini sales.

"Since people are drinking less liquor, I see the sales of stronger drinks increasing," says Garrard. "Attractive glassware will help play that up. Using oversized brandy snifters helped increase sales, and I'd like to do the same thing with martinis."

Garrard also boosts non-alcoholic drink sales with fine presentations. She is doing well with fancy French fruit juice drinks served in wine glasses. Sparkling apple cider served in a champagne glass also is a strong seller.

Operators say wine sales are holding up well and they are expanding the number of labels available by the glass. Sage says he has increased his wine prices by 15% to make up the losses in hard liquor.

To answer the loss of business-meal drinking, many operators have tried to market non-alcoholic beer and "mocktails." Some West Coast and midscale operators report meeting with modest success, while others do not understand the interest.

"Everyone says it's the answer to their problems," says May. "I can't believe it. Why would someone pay $2 for someone's water when you can get iced tea for $1. It's a sophisticated thing to do, but I think it's trendy and it will come and go."

In the restaurant lounges, the word cocktail is dropping from the name, according to George Rice, president of GDR/Crest. The focus is turning to snack food. "Lounges have become surrogates for the dining room and are very consistent with grazing trends," says Rice.

At the Gilbert/Robinson operations, May says they are doing more with food during cocktail hour.

"It's obvious that people aren't going to cocktail hour to get blasted," says May. "But if you offer a good array of food, you'll get the business. But as far as promoting things like Kamikaze Night, that is out. It's a dangerous game but some are still playing it. They must be nuts or have better insurance than I do."

Customers also appear to be spending more on desserts and appetizers. "We have cut back the list of after-dinner drinks because the demand isn't there," says Kip Downing, owner of Cafe Pacifica in San Diego. "Fifty percent of our customers are buying dessert, but out of 150 turns we are selling five after-dinner drinks."

Other operators, like Sage, are approaching the changing trend and doing well by adding after-dinner liquor cart service to promote liqueurs and related desserts.

"We are much better off selling cordials as opposed to desserts, both from a labor and production standpoint, and from a gross profit standpoint," says Sage.

While drinking habits are changing, operators are developing new success formulas for marketing alcohol by staying on top of trends such as the increased demand for imported beer. The emphasis seems to be switching to offering quality products, beautifully presented.

And the fact that consumers find alternate products that represent reasonable replacements should act as a big message for marketers, according to Rice. "The degree that they can develop drinks that fit today's market will be to their credit," says Rice. *—Jeff Weinstein*

An NRA study shows 74% of females are likely to order wine by the glass.

IMPORTED BEERS A HIT

The demand for imported beers has skyrocketed in the past few years. The NRA Beverage Preference study shows 70% of the respondents feel restaurants should serve several imports. Alcohol sales at The Berghoff in Chicago, which specializes in imported beers, are near where they were five years ago because, as General Manager Bill Marquardt puts it, "trends have caught up to us rather than us catching up to them."

ACTION EXPRESS

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RESTAURANTS & INSTITUTIONS, a Cahners publication
1350 E. Touhy Ave., P.O. Box 5080, Des Plaines, IL 60017-5080 Phone: 312/635-8800

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RESTAURANTS & INSTITUTIONS (ISSN 0273-5520) is published biweekly (with an additional issue in February, March, June and October) in national, demographic and separate editions by The Cahners Publishing Company, A Division of Reed Publishing USA, 275 Washington St., Newton, MA 02158-1630. Terrence M. McDermott, President; David S. Wexler, Group Vice President; Jerry D. Neth, Vice President/Publishing Operations; J.J. Walsh, Financial Vice President/Magazine Division; Thomas J. Dellamaria, Vice President/Production and Manufacturing. Circulation records are maintained at Cahners Publishing Company, 44 Cook St., Denver, CO 80206-5191. Phone: 303/388-4511. Second-class postage paid at Denver, CO 80206-5191 and additional mailing offices. Postmaster: Send form 3579 to our Denver address. RESTAURANTS & INSTITUTIONS copyright 1987 by Reed Publishing USA; Saul Goldweitz, Chairman; Ronald G. Segel, President and Chief Executive Officer; Robert L. Krakoff, Executive Vice President; William M. Platt, Senior Vice President. Annual subscription rates for non-qualified people: USA, $88; Canada/Mexico, $100; other countries, $125 for surface mail and $210 for air mail. Except for special issues where price changes are indicated, single copies of regular issues are available for $6, $8 and $10 (USA, Canada/Mexico and foreign). Please address all subscription mail to RESTAURANTS & INSTITUTIONS, 44 Cook St., Denver, CO 80206-5191.